

## Practical Ethics

### *Third Edition*

For thirty years, Peter Singer's *Practical Ethics* has been the classic introduction to applied ethics. For this third edition, the author has revised and updated all the chapters and added a new chapter addressing climate change, one of the most important ethical challenges of our generation.

Some of the questions discussed in this book concern our daily lives. Is it ethical to buy luxuries when others do not have enough to eat? Should we buy meat produced from intensively reared animals? Am I doing something wrong if my carbon footprint is above the global average? Other questions confront us as concerned citizens: equality and discrimination on the grounds of race or sex; abortion, the use of embryos for research, and euthanasia; political violence and terrorism; and the preservation of our planet's environment.

This book's lucid style and provocative arguments make it an ideal text for university courses and for anyone willing to think about how she or he ought to live.

Peter Singer is currently Ira W. DeCamp Professor of Bioethics at the University Center for Human Values at Princeton University and Laureate Professor at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne. He is the author or editor of more than forty books, including *Animal Liberation* (1975), *Rethinking Life and Death* (1996) and, most recently, *The Life You Can Save* (2009). In 2005, he was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by *Time* magazine.

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**PETER SINGER**

*Princeton University and the University of Melbourne*



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## Preface

Practical ethics covers a wide area. We can find ethical ramifications in most of our choices, if we look hard enough. This book does not attempt to cover the whole area. The problems it deals with have been selected on two grounds: relevance and the extent to which philosophical reasoning can contribute to discussion of them.

The most relevant ethical issues are those that confront us daily: is it right to spend money on entertaining ourselves when we could use it to help people living in extreme poverty? Are we justified in treating animals as nothing more than machines producing flesh for us to eat? Should we drive a car – thus emitting greenhouse gases that warm the planet – if we could walk, cycle or use public transport? Other problems, like abortion and euthanasia, fortunately are not everyday decisions for most of us; but they are still relevant because they can arise at some time in our lives. They are also issues of current concern about which any active participant in a democratic society should have informed and considered opinions.

The extent to which an issue can be usefully discussed philosophically depends on the kind of issue it is. Some issues are controversial largely because there are facts in dispute. Should we build nuclear power stations to replace the coal-fired ones that are a major cause of global warming? The answer to that question seems to hang largely on whether it is possible to make the nuclear fuel cycle safe, both against accidental release of radioactive materials and against terrorist attacks. Philosophers are unlikely to have the expertise to answer this question. (That does not mean that they can have nothing to say about it – for instance, they may still be able to say something useful about whether it is acceptable to run

a given risk.) In other cases, however, the facts are clear and accepted by both sides, and it is conflicting ethical views that give rise to disagreement over what to do. The important facts about abortion are not really in dispute – as we shall see in Chapter 6, when does a human life begin? is really a question of values rather than of facts – but the ethics of abortion is hotly disputed. With questions of this kind, the methods of reasoning and analysis in which philosophers engage really can make a difference. The issues discussed in this book are ones in which ethical, rather than factual, disagreement plays a major role. Thinking about them philosophically should enable us to reach better-justified conclusions.

*Practical Ethics*, first published in 1980, has been widely read, used in many courses at universities and colleges and translated into fifteen languages. I always expected that many readers would disagree with the conclusions I defend. What I did not expect was that some would try to prevent the book's arguments being discussed. Yet in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in Germany, Austria and Switzerland, opposition to the views on euthanasia contained in this book reached such a peak that conferences or lectures at which I was invited to speak were cancelled, and courses taught by professors at German universities in which the book was to be used were subjected to such repeated disruption that they had to be abandoned. In Zurich in 1991, when I was attempting to lecture, a protester leapt onto the stage, tore my glasses from my face, threw them down on the floor and stamped on them. Less violent protests took place at Princeton University in 1999, when I was appointed to a chair of bioethics. People objecting to my views barred the entrance to the central administrative building of the university, demanding that my appointment be rescinded. Steve Forbes, a trustee of the university and at the time a candidate for the Republican nomination for the President of the United States, announced that as long as I was at the university, he would withhold further donations to it. Both the university president and I received death threats. To its great credit, the university stood firm in its defence of academic freedom.

The protests led me to reflect on whether the views defended in this book really are so erroneous or so dangerous that they would be better left unsaid. Although many of the protesters were simply misinformed about what I am saying, there is an underlying truth to the claim that the book breaks a taboo – or perhaps more than one taboo. In Germany since the Nazi era, for many years it was impossible to discuss openly the question of euthanasia or whether a human life may be so full of misery as not to



be worth living. More fundamental still, and not limited to Germany, is the taboo on comparing the value of human and nonhuman lives. In the commotion that followed the cancellation of a conference in Germany at which I had been invited to speak, the German sponsoring organization, to disassociate itself from my views, passed a series of motions, one of which read: 'The uniqueness of human life forbids any comparison – or more specifically, equation – of human existence with other living beings, with their forms of life or interests.' Comparing, and in some cases equating, the lives of humans and animals is exactly what some chapters of this book are about; in fact, it could be said that if there is any single aspect of this book that distinguishes it from other approaches to such issues as human equality, abortion, euthanasia and the environment, it is the fact that these topics are approached with a conscious disavowal of any assumption that all members of our own species have, merely because they are members of our species, any distinctive worth or inherent value that puts them above members of other species. The belief in human superiority is a very fundamental one, and it underlies our thinking in many sensitive areas. To challenge it is no trivial matter, and that such a challenge should provoke a strong reaction ought not to surprise us. Nevertheless, once we have understood that the breaching of this taboo on comparing humans and animals is partially responsible for the protests, it becomes clear that there is no going back. For reasons that are developed in subsequent chapters, to prohibit any cross-species comparisons would be philosophically indefensible. It would also make it impossible to overcome the wrongs we are now doing to nonhuman animals and would reinforce attitudes that have done irreparable damage to the environment of our planet.

So I have not backed away from the views that have caused so much controversy. If these views have their dangers, the danger of attempting to continue to silence criticism of widely accepted ideas is greater still. Since the days of Plato, philosophy has advanced dialectically as philosophers have offered reasons for disagreeing with the views of other philosophers. Learning from disagreement leads us to a more defensible position and is one reason why, even if the views I hold are mistaken, they should be discussed.

Though I have not changed my views on those topics – euthanasia and abortion – against which most of the protests were directed, this third edition is significantly different from the first and second editions. Every chapter has been reworked, factual material has been updated, and where my position has been misunderstood by my critics, I have tried

to make it clearer. On some issues, new questions and new arguments relevant to old questions have emerged. In the discussion of the moral status of early human life, for instance, scientific advances have led to a new debate about the destruction of human embryos to obtain stem cells. The developing scientific understanding of early human life has not only given rise to hopes of major gains in treating disease; it has also demonstrated that many cells – not only the fertilized egg – contain the potential to start a new human life. We need to ask whether this changes the arguments about the moral status of human embryos and, if so, in what way.

The sections of the book that have left me in the greatest philosophical uncertainty are those parts of Chapters 4 and 5 that discuss whether there is some sense in which bringing into existence a new being – whether a human being or a nonhuman animal – can compensate for the death of a similar being who has been killed. That issue in turn leads to questions about the optimum population size and whether the existence of more sentient beings enjoying their lives would, other things being equal, be a good thing. These questions may seem arcane and far removed from the ‘practical ethics’ promised by the title of this book, but they have important ethical implications. As we shall see, they can serve as an example of how our judgments of what is right and wrong need to be informed by investigations into deep and difficult philosophical issues. In revising these sections for this edition, I have found myself unable to maintain with any confidence that the position I took in the previous edition – based solely on preference utilitarianism – offers a satisfactory answer to these quandaries.

That reconsideration of my earlier position is the most significant philosophical change to this edition. The addition with the greatest practical importance, however, is a new chapter that deals with the great moral challenge of our time – climate change. Too often, we fail to see climate change as an ethical issue. I hope this chapter will show clearly that it is. The number of chapters in this edition remains the same as it was for the second edition because a chapter that I added to that edition, on our obligation to accept refugees, does not appear in this edition. This is not because the issue of admitting refugees has become any less important than it was in 1993. On the contrary, it is probably more significant now and will become more significant still, in coming decades, as we begin to see increasing numbers of ‘climate refugees’ – people who can no longer live where their parents and grandparents lived, because rainfall patterns have changed or sea levels have risen. But I had become dissatisfied with

the chapter as it stood. This is partly because the issue is one to which the facts – for example, about the possibility of a country taking in large numbers of refugees without this leading to a racist backlash that would harm minority groups within the country – are highly relevant. I had also become more aware of differences between countries that are relevant to this issue, and so I reluctantly concluded that any attempt to deal with the issue in a single chapter of a volume such as this, aimed at an international audience, is bound to be superficial. If the issue cannot be treated adequately and in a properly nuanced way, I decided, it would be better not to include it in this book, especially as it is one of those issues on which governments must set policy rather than one on which individuals actions can make a significant difference.

In writing and revising this book, I have made extensive use of my own previously published articles and books. Chapter 3 is based on my book, *Animal Liberation* (2nd edition, New York Review/Random House, 1990), although it also takes account of objections made since the book first appeared in 1975. The sections of Chapter 6 on such topics as in vitro fertilization, the argument from potential, embryo experimentation and the use of fetal tissue, all draw on work I wrote jointly with Karen Dawson, which was published as “IVF and the Argument from Potential”, in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 17 (1988) and in Peter Singer, Helga Kuhse and others, *Embryo Experimentation* (Cambridge University Press, 1990). In the third edition, this chapter includes material responding to the arguments of Patrick Lee and Robert George that first appeared in Agata Sagan and Peter Singer, “The Moral Status of Stem Cells”, *Metaphilosophy*, 38 (2007). Chapter 7 contains material from the much fuller treatment of the issue of euthanasia for severely disabled infants that Helga Kuhse and I provided in *Should the Baby Live?* (Oxford University Press, 1985). Chapter 8 restates arguments from “Famine, Affluence and Morality”, *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, vol. 1 (1972), and for this edition, I drew on my much more recent and comprehensive account of the issue in *The Life You Can Save* (Random House, 2009). The new Chapter 9 draws on material first published in *One World* (Yale University Press, 2002) and from “Climate Change as an Ethical Issue”, in Jeremy Moss (ed.), *Climate Change and Social Justice* (Melbourne University Press, 2009). Chapter 10 is based on “Environmental Values”, a chapter I contributed to Ian Marsh (ed.), *The Environmental Challenge* (Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1991). Portions of Chapter 11 draw on my first book, *Democracy and Disobedience* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973). The revisions for the third edition also include passages from my responses

to critics in *Peter Singer Under Fire*, edited by Jeff Schaler (Open Court, Chicago, 2009).

H. J. McCloskey, Derek Parfit and Robert Young provided useful comments on a draft version of the first edition of this book. Robert Young's ideas also entered into my thinking at an earlier stage, when we jointly taught a course on these topics at La Trobe University. The chapter on euthanasia, in particular, owes much to his ideas, though he may not agree with everything in it. Going back further still, my interest in ethics was stimulated by H. J. McCloskey, whom I was fortunate to have as a teacher during my undergraduate years; and the mark left by R. M. Hare, who taught me at Oxford, is apparent in the ethical foundations underlying the positions taken in this book. Jeremy Mynott of Cambridge University Press encouraged me to write the book and helped to shape and improve it as it went along. The second edition of the book benefited from work I did with Karen Dawson, Paola Cavalieri, Renata Singer and especially Helga Kuhse. For this third edition, I must give what are, sadly, posthumous thanks to Brent Howard, a gifted thinker who several years ago sent me extensive notes for a possible revision of the second edition. I am also most grateful to Agata Sagan for suggestions and research assistance throughout the revision of the book. Her contribution is most evident in the discussion of the moral status of embryos and stem cells, but her ideas and suggestions have improved the book in several other areas as well.

There are, of course, many others with whom I have discussed the issues that are the subject of this book. Back in 1984, Dale Jamieson made me aware of the significance of climate change as an ethical issue, and I continue to check my thoughts on that topic and on many others with him. I have learned a lot from Jeff McMahan, from personal contact, from a graduate seminar we co-taught on issues of life and death and from his many writings. At Princeton University, I have often benefited from comments on my work from my colleagues, from visiting Fellows at the University Center for Human Values and from students, both graduate and undergraduate. Don Marquis and David Benatar each spent a year at the Center, and those visits provided opportunities for many good discussions. I also thank my colleagues and the graduate students at the Centre for Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics at the University of Melbourne for their comments at occasional lectures and seminars at which I have presented my work.

Harriet McBryde Johnson and I disagreed vehemently about euthanasia for infants with severe disabilities, but there was never any acrimony

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between us, and she always presented my views with scrupulous fairness. Sadly, our exchanges ended with her death in 2008, and I miss her critical presence.

The astute reader who compares this edition with the previous one may notice that I am now more ready to entertain – although not yet embrace – the idea that there are objective ethical truths that are independent of what anyone desires. I owe that shift – which could not be adequately explored in a book of this nature – to my reading of a draft of Derek Parfit’s immensely impressive forthcoming book, *On What Matters*. I hope to write more about this question on another occasion.

Peter Singer  
Princeton and Melbourne, 2010

*Note to the reader.* To avoid cluttering the text, notes, references and suggested further reading are grouped together at the end of the book.